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ABSTRACT

This study investigated, in a laboratory experimental framework, the relative influences of television commercials and parental counter-commercial advocacy on children's consumption choice behavior. Sixty-four 8- to 10-year-old boys were randomly assigned to one of three treatment groups: (1) no counter commercial advocacy (control group), (2) power-assertive type of parental counter-commercial advocacy, (3) reasoning type of parental counter-commercial advocacy. Subjects viewed a 20-minute children's television program that contained three repetitions of commercials for one of two toys. (The toys had been selected in a pilot study from a group of toys not yet introduced in the area which had had statistically equal appeal to boys of the subjects' age.) After viewing the commercials, the subjects were placed in a room with their mothers who had been instructed to exhibit one of the three advocacy conditions. Children then played a game with the experimenter in which they were allowed to win tokens which they exchanged for one of the two toys. Product choice and decision time were the dependent variables. Results partially supported the hypothesis that a reasoning style rather than a power assertive style of parental counter-commercial advocacy would be more effective in counteracting the influence of television commercials, but did so only in the situations in which the advertising induced temptation was not very high to begin with. (Author/SB)

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MEDIATING ROLE OF PARENTAL INFLUENCE IN CHILDREN"S RESPONSE TO TELEVISION COMMERCIALS: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

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ABSTRACT

The study investigated in a laboratory experimental framework, the relative influences of television commercials and parental counter-commercial advocacy on children's consumption choice behavior. The results indicated support to the hypothesis that a "reasoning" rather than a "power-assertive" style of parental counter-commercial advocacy will be more effective in counteracting the influence of television commercials, but did so only in the situation when the advertising-induced temptation was not very high to begin with.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, television advertising directed at children has been the focus of much debate, and has drawn the attention of consumerists, government agencies, marketers, and the public. At the basis of the criticism of the practice is the argument that it is a powerful influence on children, and induces children to become "surrogate salesmen" urging their parents to buy the advertised products [1]. It is suggested that the stresses and strains imposed on parents by such demands by children lead to an unhealthy parent-child relationship, especially among low-income families [21]. On the other hand, defenders of children's television advertising argue that parents modify its impact through counter-commerical advocacy and appropriate training of children in consumption skills [3]. Howard and Hulbert stated in a report of the testimony and record of the Federal Trade Commission's Hearings on Modern Advertising Practices in 1971, that "there is a great deal of conflict in viewpoint, and little hard data which can be used in resolving it" [8]. There has been a considerable increase in interest among consumer researchers, in the last few years, regarding the effects of television advertising on children.

Much of the pioneering research on the effects of television advertising on children investigated children's information processing of television commercials as a function of the stages of their cognitive development [17, 10, 14]. However, the dynamics of parent-child interaction may be expected to be an important influence on children's consumption behavior and their learning of consumer skills. Only limited research has been directed toward examining consumption-related parent-child interaction, and the manner in which such interaction mediates, if at all, the influence of television advertising on children's consumption preferences and choice behavior.

PAST RESEARCH ON CONSUMPTION-RELATED PARENT-CHILD INTERACTION

Children exert influence on parental purchasing behavior either through "passive dictation" [20], or overt purchase-influence attempts. Berey and Pollay [5] examined the influence of eight to eleven year old children on breakfast cereal purchases in middle and upper-middle class families. They found that highly child-centered mothers tend to purchase the cereals requested by their children less frequently than less child-centered mothers. It was speculated that the result may indicate that the mother who is more child-centered has a greater tendency to purchase cereals following her view of what is right and healthful, rather than yield to the child's preferences (which are usually in favor of presweetened cereals). Ward and Wackman [18] studied parental perceptions of the frequency of purchase-influence attempts of five to twelve year old children, and parental yielding among middle and upper-middle class families. Results revealed that purchase requests to parents decrease as the child grows older, but that the parent's yielding to the child's requests increases as the child grows older. It was interpreted to mean that mothers become increasingly trusting of their children's judgement as their children grow older. Interestingly, restrictions on children's television viewing were not related to perceived frequency of purchase-influence attempts. Ward and Wackman also found that mothers who have favorable attitudes toward advertising are more likely to yield to purchase-influence attempts by children than mothers with less favorable attitudes. It should be noted that the above two studies were not designed to and did not specifically demonstrate that the children's purchase-influence attempts were triggered by exposure to television commercials. Based on a projective study of the likely effects of television advertising, Sheikh and Moleski [13] suggested that by the third grade level, television commercials begin to show

a strong effect on children. Third graders (as compared to first and fifth graders) exhibited the maximum level of the purchase-requesting tendencies in response to commercials (introduced through an incomplete story method); they also appeared less prone to accept parental refusal, and were more likely to react aggressively when faced with such consumption-related frustrations. However, the conclusions of this study should be viewed cautiously since the behavior tendencies inferred were not based on actual exposure of the subjects to television commercials.

Research evidence on the relative influences of parents and television advertising on children's consumption behavior is sparse. Ward suggested that much of consumer socialization in the family is through incidental learning rather than through systematic and purposive parental training [16]. Research by Ward and his associates identified five common "teaching modes" used by mothers in helping their children acquire the necessary consumer skills: 1) prohibition of certain acts; 2) "lectures" i.e., "one-way" talks by mother to child regarding consumer activities; 3) discussions with the child about consumer decisions; 4) acting as an example of a consumer; and 5) allowing the child to learn from his own experience [19, p. 11]. It was found that after the child is past third-grade mothers tend to decrease their reliance on the use of prohibition as a teaching device, and increase the number of methods they employ in their child's consumer training [19, p. 12]. Rossiter and Robertson [11] found that children of better educated parents exhibited stronger cognitive and attitudinal defenses to television commercials. Perhaps this could be due to the reliance of better educated parents more on intellect and reasoning than on authority position [6], and a "more responsible attitude toward the need for children's media socialization" [11, p. 140]. It is also significant that their research did not find the amount of parent-child interaction, per se, to be a significant correlate of children's resistance to the influence of television commercials. It was suggested that

it may be the qualitative nature rather than the quantitative aspect of parent-child interaction that leads to development of defenses to television commercials in children.

The purpose of the present research study was to investigate in a laboratory experimental framework, the relative influences of television commercials and parental counter-commercial advocacy on children's consumption choice behavior. Some previous research studies in child psychology suggested that the outcome may depend upon the style of parental advocacy. For example, Aronson cited evidence showing that children who were prohibited to play with an attractive toy under a mild threat of punishment (high dissonance) condition, derogated the forbidden toy and refrained from playing with it in subsequent encounters more so than under a severe threat of punishment (low dissonance) condition [2]. Becker [4] and Martin [9] suggested that children exhibit greater resistance to temptation if they are treated in a warm and reasoning manner as opposed to a power-assertive fashion. Accordingly, it was hypothesized in the present study that a reasoning type of parental counter-commercial advocacy will be more effective than a power-assertive format in counteracting the influence of television commercials on children's choice behavior.

METHODOLOGY

The study employed a laboratory approach in which various conditions of the treatment variable, parental counter-commercial advocacy, were created experimentally. The advantages of the experimental approach in establishing causal links between television commercials and their effects on children were demonstrated by Goldberg and Gorn [7].

Pilot Study

A pilot study was conducted to select two children's toys which would be of approximately equal appeal to boys between the ages of eight and ten years. Forty six boys in this age group ranked their preferences for four

different toys. The toys were displayed in packages. Although the contents were not accessible for inspection by the subjects, game descriptions could be read through the clear-plastic wrappers. None of these toys were available in the market or advertised yet. They were all made by nationally known toy manufacturers, and scheduled for introduction in the 1975 Christmas season.

Two of the products, designated as 'B' and 'H' in this article, were found to have statistically equivalent rank distributions and received average ranks of 2.76 and 2.67 respectively (rank '1' being the most preferred choice). Both were fast-action games intended by their manufacturers for children of seven years or older, and were planned to be sold at approximately seven dollars at the retail level. These two games were judged to be of approximately equal attractiveness to boys of this age group, and were thus selected for use in the research experiment.

Experimental Procedure

The experiment was conducted in a psychology laboratory specially modified for the purposes of the present study. Sixty-four eight to ten year old boys were recruited from three grade schools in the Milwaukee metropolitan area. Subjects were randomly assigned to one of three treatment conditions: 1) no counter-commercial advocacy (control group), 2) power-assertive type of parental counter-commercial advocacy, 3) reasoning type of parental counter-commercial advocacy. Half of the subjects in each treatment condition were randomly selected to view a children's television program of approximately 20 minutes length containing three repetitions of a commercial for product B; the other half viewed the same program containing three repetitions of a commercial for product H. Both commercials were obtained in their finished format (the same commercials were later used during their market introduction) from national advertising agencies, and were 30 seconds long each. Each subject made a choice between products B and H in a simulated store, subsequent to his exposure to television advertising for one of the products and to counter-commercial advocacy from his mother.

Individual appointments were set-up for each mother and child team in advance. Mothers were given specific instructions concerning the information they should give to the children: he will be coming to the university to play a game in which he has a chance to win a toy prize. It was emphasized that they should not reveal the real purpose of the visit. Upon their arrival at the laboratory, the mother and child were greeted by the experimenters (two graduate students in child psychology). After spending approximately ten minutes to establish rapport with the child and allow him to familiarize himself with the surroundings, one of the experimenters told the child that he had to ask his mother a few questions, and told him to wait in the next room and watch television for a little while. The second experimenter led the subject to the adjoining room and turned on a video monitor while explaining that only one television channel could be received there. After the subject was seated comfortably, the experimenter left the child to watch the monitor.

During this period, the mother was being trained by the first experimenter in communicating her counter-commercial advocacy either in a power-assertive or a reasoning style depending upon the randomly selected treatment condition. Two short dialogues were prepared in advance to reflect the two advocacy styles. The mother initially questions the child about the program he watched on television, whether he saw any commercials, and what the commercial showed. In the power-assertive dialogue, the mother disparages the advertised toy as simply another useless game that he does not need. She arbitrarily cuts off any further explanation by the child by saying that she does not want to hear anymore arguments about it. The mother was asked to exhibit a slight aloofness and authoritative manner in this treatment condition. In the reasoning dialogue, the mother suggests to the child that toys shown in commercials always look better and bigger than they really are, and that kids are usually disappointed once they bring them home. If the child attempts to explain further, she suggests that there are alot of other toys not shown on television which are

probably more interesting and fun. The mother was asked to assume an understanding and reasonable posture in this treatment condition. The mother, with the help of the experimenter, rehearsed her counter-commercial advocacy a number of times through role-playing.

The other experimenter returned to the subject at the end of the television program and told him that they were going to play a game while walking back into the main room; the experimenter asked the subject to wait with his mother for a few moments until he set-up the game. During this interlude, the mother communicated the counter-commercial advocacy which she practiced earlier.

The experimenter then rejoined them, and led the subject into another room and seated him in front of a lever-pulling coin-dispensing apparatus similar to the one described by Ryan and Cantor [12]. The purpose of this step was to reduce any direct connection in the subject's mind between the viewing of television commercials and his forthcoming product choice in the simulated store. The subject was told that if the lever was pulled with the right strength and speed, a coin would be dispensed, and that if he won ten coins he could use them to "purchase" a toy of his choice in the "store" in the next room. After a few practice trials, the game was begun and the subject was allowed to win the needed coins.

At this point, the experimenter asked the subject to go into the "store," look at the games, and decide which one he would like to "buy" with the ten coins he won. The subject was told to indicate his choice to the experimenter by bringing back the name card placed in front of the chosen game. Packages of products B and H were displayed in the simulated store. Although the contents of the package were not accessible for inspection by the subject, the package illustrations and game descriptions could be seen through the clear-plastic wrappers. Viewing through a one-way mirror located above the display counter, one of the experimenters recorded the decision time with a stop-

watch, measured from the time the subject entered the store to the time at which he left it. The actual product choice[1] made by the subject and the decision time served as the dependent variables in the analysis. Data collection was completed before the television commercials and the products used in the study actually appeared in the Milwaukee market.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Decision Time

Decision times were analyzed to examine if the counter-commercial advocacy conditions had any effect on the amount of deliberation by the subjects in choosing between the two alternatives. The results of an analysis of variance of decision times are presented in Table 1. No significant differences were found between the two products, but differences were found to be significant between the counter-commercial advocacy conditions. A closer examination of pairwise differences indicated that although the two counter-commercial advocacy conditions, "power-assertive" and "reasoning," did not differ significantly in decision times, each of them resulted in significantly greater decision times as compared to the control group (no counter-commercial advocacy). Thus, the presence of either type of parental counter-commercial advocacy appeared to have increased the amount of deliberation by the children, although the exact nature of the cognitive activity can only be speculated.

Product Choice

The percentages of subjects who chose the advertised product in the simulated store under each of the treatment conditions are shown in Table 2. The results are presented for the total sample as well as for the two advertised products separately.

When the information for both advertised products was pooled, the analysis indicated no statistically significant differences in percentages of children

TABLE 1

ANALYSIS OF VARIANCE OF DECISION TIMES

USING SCHEFFE'S APPROXIMATION FOR UNEQUAL CELL SIZES

Source of Variation	Sum of Squares	d.f	Mean Sum of Squares	F
Products	774.11	1	774.11	0.62
Counter-Commercial Advocacy	11124.60	2	5562.30	4.46[a]
Interaction	418.36	2	209.18	0.17
Within Cells	72323.75	58	1246.96	
Total	83436.36	63		

[a]Significant at 0.05 level.

TABLE 2

PERCENTAGES OF SUBJECTS CHOOSING ADVERTISED PRODUCT

IN EACH OF THE TREATMENT CONDITIONS

Analysis Group	Counter-Commercial Advocacy Style			Total	Chi-Square[a]
	Control Group	Power-Assertive	Reasoning		
Both products B and H (pooled data)	62.5% (n =16)	66.7% (n =24)	50.0% (n =24)	59.4% (n =64)	1.46
Product H advertised	50.0% (n =8)	75.0% (n =12)	25.0% (n =12	50.0% (n =32)	6.00[b]
Product B advertised	75.0% (n =8)	58.3% (n =12)	75.0% (n =12)	68.7% (n =32)	1.40

[a]The chi-square statistic to test whether the true proportions vary between the treatment groups was computed using the following formula by Snedecor and Irwin [p. 240]:

$$\chi^2 = \Sigma n_i(pi - \bar{p})^2/\bar{p}(1 - \bar{p})$$

where pi is the proportion of subjects who chose the advertised product in treatment group i, $\bar{p}$ is the overall proportion, and n_i is the size of ith treatment group. Snedecor and Cochran pointed out that the above test can still be used with some expected frequencies (i.e., $n_i\bar{p}$ and $n_i(1-\bar{p})$) as low as 1, provided most of the expectations are substantially larger [p. 241].

[b]Significant at 0.05 level.

choosing the product featured in the television commercial between the three treatment conditions (χ^2 = 1.46, d.f = 2). The percentage choice of the advertised product over the unadvertised one did not depend on the type of parental counter-commercial advocacy.

An interesting pattern of results was found when the experimental data were analyzed for the two advertised products separately. When 'H' was the advertised product, half of the subjects in the control group (i.e., those who were not exposed to any counter-commercial advocacy) chose it over the unadvertised product'B' in the simulated store. However, when 'B' was the advertised product, three-quarters of the subjects in the control group chose it over the unadvertised alternative 'H.' It may be recalled that the two products received equivalent preference rankings in the pilot study in which no television commercials for either product were shown to the subjects. The evidence thus points to the conclusion that the television commercials for the two products were probably not equal in their impact---the one for product B appears to be a higher-impact commercial as compared to that for product H. The chi-square analysis performed separately for the two advertised products indicate that in the case of product B (with the higher-impact commercial), the percentages of subjects who chose the advertised product did not differ significantly between the control group and the counter-commercial advocacy groups (χ^2 = 1.40, d.f = 2). In all three treatment conditions, a high percentage of the subjects chose the advertised product over the unadvertised alternative.

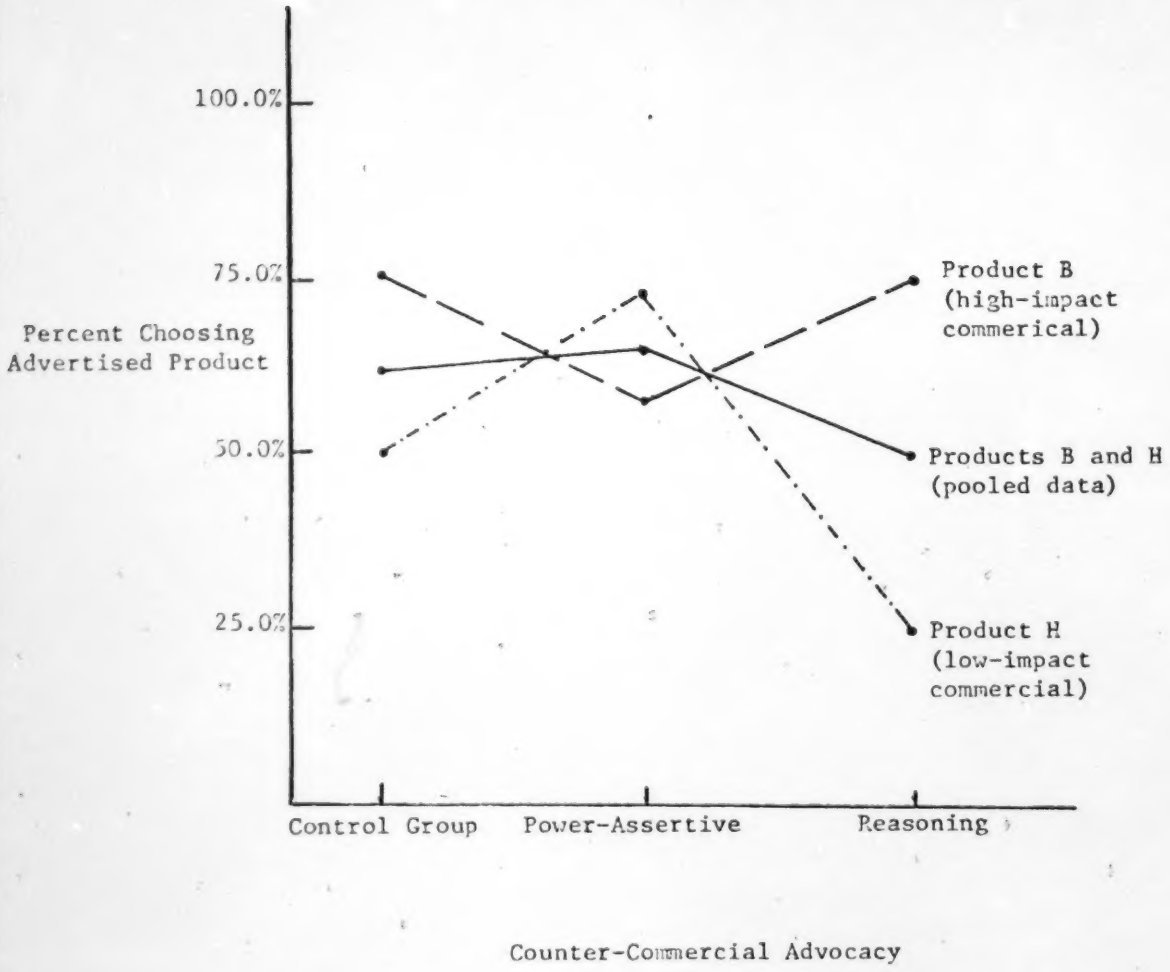
In the case of product H (with the low-impact commercial), however, the results indicate statistically significant differences in product choice between the treatment conditions (χ^2 = 6.00, d.f = 2). As shown in Table 2, in the control group, equal percentages of subjects chose the advertised and the unadvertised products; and in the reasoning condition, three-quarters of the subjects chose the unadvertised product and acted consistent with parental advocacy. In the power-assertive condition, however, the trend was reversed:

two-thirds of the subjects chose the advertised product. These interaction patterns are shown graphically in Figure 1.

The experiment thus provided partial support to the hypothesis of the research study that a "reasoning" rather than a "power-assertive" style of parental counter-commercial advocacy will be more effective in counteracting the influence of television commercials on children's consumption choice behavior. It appears that when a product, as portrayed by television commercials, was perceived by children as only "moderately" attractive (as was the case with product H), the type of parental counter-commercial advocacy was a very relevant variable. In this situation, the reasoning style of parental counter-commercial advocacy resulted in compliant behavior (consistent with parental advocacy) to a significantly greater degree than the power-assertive style. The hypothesis was not supported, however, in the situation when the product, as portrayed by television commercials, was perceived by children to be "highly" attractive. In other words, when the advertising-induced temptation" was relatively high to begin with, both styles of parental counter-commercial advocacy were found to be of limited effectiveness.

FIGURE 1

CHILDREN'S CHOICE OF ADVERTISED PRODUCT UNDER
DIFFERENT COUNTER-COMMERICAL ADVOCACY CONDITIONS



FOOTNOTES

*V. Kanti Prasad and Tanniru R. Rao are associate professors of marketing, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. Anees A. Sheikh is an associate professor of psychology, Marquette University, Milwaukee. The authors were co-principal investigators of this study which was supported by grant MH26348 from the National Institute of Mental Health. Partial support for the study from the Urban Research Center, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee is also gratefully acknowledged. The authors thank their graduate research assistants, Martin Moleski and Thomas Dragon, for their valuable help in conducting the experiments in this study.

1. The games chosen by the subjects were delivered to their homes at a later date.

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